**May 2005**

**Recommended Actions
for
Closing the Special Education Achievement Gap**

Presented to the Kentucky Board of Education

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
## Recommended Actions
## For Closing the Special Education Achievement Gap

Currently, in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, there is a clear and significant gap between levels of academic proficiency that all students are capable of achieving and the levels of achievement of students with disabilities. There are numerous actions that need to occur at the school, district, and state levels to close this gap. While the tasks are extremely challenging, they are not insurmountable. For Kentucky to successfully close the special education achievement gap, there must be a concerted, focused and _intentional_ effort by all educational stakeholders to exert immense scrutiny, devotion, and energy to the following:

- Education policy makers and practitioners at every level must commit to a thorough examination and understanding of all issues related to _organizational and school culture._
- Closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities must be guided by _processes, policies and procedures_, just as processes, policies, and procedures guide other educational goals and priorities at the school, district, and state levels.
- Targeted, high quality _professional development_ designed around _effective programming_ must be provided in schools where significant special education achievement gaps exist. Literacy efforts must be addressed to ensure all students have a firm foundation in order to be successful in school across all content areas.
- The Kentucky Department of Education, local school districts, individual schools and communities must join forces and develop systems that promote _collaborative approaches_ to serving students with disabilities. It should be commonplace for students with disabilities to have access to rigorous curriculum in the regular classroom setting with specially designed services provided by highly trained special education teachers within that setting.
- Schools, local school districts, and the Kentucky Department of Education must intentionally _target human and fiscal resources_, in ways that ensure and accelerate achievement for students with disabilities in order for them to reach proficiency by 2014 and beyond.

The recommended actions in this plan are organized around five components that are essential and foundational in closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities. There must be a process and plan in place to effectively review, revise, implement, and monitor all processes, policies, procedures, professional development, and human and fiscal resources to ensure effective implementation and sustainability of each of these components. The five essential components are:

1. Inclusion of special education students in the **_rigorous curriculum_** with effective instruction, appropriate support and ongoing assessment
2. Assuring that special education students receive instruction and specially designed services by **_qualified regular and special education teachers_** who are certified in their assigned areas, committed to progress of all students, understand effective instructional strategies, routinely collaborate across areas and receive job-embedded professional development specific to the needs of their students
3. Implementing a pre-referral process that minimizes inappropriate placements in special education and affords all students access to a variety of interventions and an **_identification process_** that utilizes appropriate, research-based evaluation tools

4. Ensuring commitment to and ***accountability*** for closing this gap is constantly monitored and evaluated at the school, district and state level and policies and procedures are specifically constructed for this purpose
5. Focusing on effective state and local ***leadership*** that will examine issues related to ***organizational structures and culture of schools*** to ensure they meet the needs of students for a climate of high expectations for all students and staff, data-driven decision making, effective communication with stakeholders, appropriate allocation of resources and celebration of student success and achievement

The recommendations are further divided into considerations for the Kentucky Board of Education, plans of action in the Kentucky Department of Education and recommendations for local school districts and schools.

**RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**
**FOR**
**CLOSING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT GAP**


## INTRODUCTION

Despite many years of attention, the difference in achievement among various groups of students continues to be a major problem. Across the country and everyday in Kentucky schools, affluent students, white students and students from well-educated families outperform students of poverty and African American students on almost every indicator of academic achievement. This discrepancy in performance has become generally referred to as an *"achievement gap."*

While any and all achievement gaps are important, Kentucky's 2004 assessment data clearly shows that the most significant gap is the one that exists between the levels of academic proficiency we believe all students are capable of achieving and the very low levels of achievement of *students with disabilities*. Therefore, the focus of the following discussion and recommended actions is on the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. We know that all students can learn, and learn at high levels. Students with disabilities, however, have unique and special needs that require specific learning supports. Each and every one of these students is entitled to receive these supports to ensure that they have an equal opportunity to learn and that they succeed in learning. Each and every school must have a plan of action to make this happen.

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) reviewed extensive research and studied some schools in the state that are closing this achievement gap in order to compose recommended actions. It is important to note that although the schools studied provided specific supports to students with disabilities, they *all* reported that they do **not** target any specific student group. They employ *school-wide practices* aimed at raising achievement among all students regardless of their levels of performance or their demographic characteristics. Additionally, none of the schools could pinpoint a single strategy or program that was responsible for their success with special education students. Success was attributed to the cumulative effects of several factors - *intentional* factors.

## PROCESS

A KDE cross agency Achievement Gap Team reviewed progress data of Kentucky schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels to identify schools whose data demonstrated a closing of achievement gaps in one or more of the subpopulations (gender, disability, limited English proficiency, ethnicity and socioeconomic status). A school was considered to be closing the gap in a subpopulation if:

- the school was meeting or exceeding its state accountability goal; the school was meeting all requirements of the accountability system (above or at goal for the biennium and meeting novice reduction);
- the school sustained whole school improvement for a minimum of six years - accountability goal remained up;

- the overall academic index of all groups observed (students with no disability/students with disabilities; African American/white, etc.) had to show improvement (one group did not improve at the expense of or to the detriment of another); and
- the school closed the academic index in one or more subpopulations in reading and/or mathematics by at least 10 points; or the school closed its overall academic index (gap) in a subgroup by at least 10 points.

*Examples* of schools meeting the criteria included: Bardstown High School narrowed the black/white gap by 29.6 points in mathematics and 23.9 points in reading; James Madison Middle School, Hopkins County closed the special education gap by 25.2 points in reading; Brodhead Elementary, Rockcastle County closed the socioeconomic (SES) gap by 33.5 points in mathematics; and Highland Elementary, Daviess County closed its overall academic index by 14.4 points in special education and 13 points in SES.

After applying the criteria, 118 schools were identified as closing the gap in at least one subpopulation. From that list, 13 (with some of the most significant numbers and representing elementary, middle, and high along with a regional cross-section) were selected for a study of how they were closing gaps in subpopulations (site visits, interviews, etc). The schools selected were:

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|---|---|---|
| Brandeis Elementary-Jefferson | James Madison Middle-Hopkins | Bardstown High |
| Brodhead Elementary-Rockcastle | Johnson County Middle | Hancock Co. High |
| Earle D. Jones Elementary-Mason | Mason County Middle | Mason Co. High |
| Highland Elementary-Daviess | | North Hardin High |
| Porter Elementary-Johnson | | Phelps High-Pike |

*Five schools were specifically closing gaps in special education:* Earle D. Jones, Highland, James Madison Middle, Johnson County Middle and North Hardin High. It should be noted that all three schools in Mason County were closing gaps in a subpopulation.

Using goals and barriers identified by the Minority Student Achievement Task Force of 2000 and research from Katie Haycock, Larry Bell, Genevieve Gay, Ruth Johnson, Robert Marzano, Harvey Silver, Richard Strong, and others, an *Achievement Gap Site Visit Checklist* was developed for teams in conducting site visits and studies of the schools. The checklist had numerous questions related to the following eight issues/barriers identified in research and by the task force:

- Lack of rigor in curriculum for all students
- Lack of accountability and incentives to increase a subpopulation's achievement
- Subpopulation group students stereotyped as low achievers, sometimes using subjectively interpreted data
- Community failing to dialogue and face issues of a subpopulation group's achievement
- Lack of respect for cultural differences
- Lack of high expectations for all students
- Lack of content training/knowledge, skills and quality of teachers for subpopulation group and/or all students
- Districts/schools failing to effectively use data to improve student achievement

Then, based on five P's from the invitational education research of William Purkey, review teams were asked to document a school's *processes*/practices, *programs*, *people, policies*, and physical environment that assisted it in successfully closing achievement gaps.

Site visits included: interviews with principals, central office staff, teachers, students, and school leadership team members; review of Comprehensive School Improvement Plans, SBDM policies, local assessment data; and a walkthrough of the school and classrooms. The reports were analyzed to determine *practices, policies, and strategies* contributing to a school's success in closing the achievement gap as well as identifying commonalities across all of the schools. Staff also had conversations and meetings with principals, teachers, administrators, and other personnel in some other districts and cooperatives that have successful efforts underway to close the special education gap (Bowling Green Independent, Caveland Special Education Cooperative, Jefferson County Schools and Mason County Schools). These persons were asked *what they were doing to close the special education achievement gap* as well as to identify issues, challenges or barriers they felt were impeding their efforts to close this gap.

Although the schools visited were closing gaps in any and/or all of the different subpopulations, comments and recommendations in this report are specific to the schools' efforts in closing the *special education achievement gap.*

## FINDINGS

Summarized below are themes and commonalities found in the schools that were experiencing increased levels of achievement among special education students. These findings mirror national and international research around effective schools and closing the special education achievement gap.

A common theme for all schools observed and evidenced in multiple ways was the presence of a *positive school culture and climate.* Leadership, staff, students, and the community liked, valued, and enjoyed being a part of their school and there was a collective purpose to ensure that each and every student would be successful. Schools cited a commonality of vision, mission, values, and goals centered on student achievement through improved curriculum and *effective instruction*, high expectations, accountability, and an "ALL means ALL" mentality. In these schools, *all students were viewed as highly capable.* The schools had *"a culture of achievement." High expectations* and *accountability* were not mutually exclusive to students alone but demanded from leadership at the district and school building level as well. In these schools, there was a pride and professional attitude in *meeting the needs of all students*.

Students with disabilities were not separate, but a part of the general population. Resource rooms were used minimally with a strong emphasis on inclusion and *collaboration* to ensure access to general curriculum and rigor. There was *intentionality to* eliminate or minimize stigmatism for students with disabilities. Teachers accepted responsibility for all students. If a child was not reaching mastery, a collective focus and process was in place to meet the child's needs.

Leadership was beyond the traditional principal as leader and instead was *shared leadership* by administration and staff. Teachers were encouraged and expected to assume leadership roles in increasing school-wide improvement and student achievement. A strong sense of trust, effective communication, professionalism, collegiality, high levels of collaboration, and common purpose existed.

Staff in these schools cited *vertical and horizontal planning* as routine and reorganized the school day to do it. They consistently cited *continuous assessment* as essential and all indicated they focused on individual student achievement. Teachers and leadership understood the necessity of knowing exactly where the students were functioning daily in order to effectively plan future instruction and support for individual students.

All of the schools had strong emphasis on *Core Content and Program of Studies* with an increased focus on reading and math. Intensive *data analysis* for the purpose of planning instruction was also a common theme. The schools had a process for reviewing skills needed from grade level to grade level and support prior to *transition* from key grade levels.

Most of the schools incorporated and embedded *technology* as a part of everyday instruction and learning. They used it beyond remedial uses typically used in low-performing schools.

Reviewers observed positive, respectful, mutual *relationships* among leadership, staff, students, parents, and *community*. Schools and stakeholders publicly *celebrated* and supported student effort and achievement. In fact, the school and community went to great lengths to celebrate achievement and to *highlight accomplishments* of students. Student work was prominently displayed and the community and district supported the schools through resources/materials and general conversations with staff and stakeholders. There was a high rate of parent participation and volunteerism and the school was a hub for the community. The *physical environment* was safe, organized, and clean.

In these schools, *professional development* was intentional, ongoing and systemic with a correlation to student achievement. Most teachers reported there was a freedom and expectation by leadership for them to seek professional development for professional growth.

Collective *analysis of data and decision making* among staff and stakeholders was frequent and ongoing. The districts provided resources to the schools based on the needs of the students and ensured time and other resources were available to staff.

Students in these schools had the benefit of *well-qualified teachers*. Leadership in these schools moved away from retaining staff regardless of performance; rather these leaders actively reviewed staff performance and took appropriate actions for those not meeting expectations.

There was no one program or set of strategies that was closing gaps for special education children. Also, the various programs (Title I, special education, etc.) did not operate in isolation of one another.

As evidenced by the schools studied and research, it is process and not a particular product that ensures success. To be effective, the process occurs over time and is internalized by leadership, staff, students, and the community. Schools that are successfully closing the special education achievement gap and making school-wide improvement understand the complexity of change concepts and that improvement is never a checklist but rather a complex process.

Simply put, if a school wants to close the special education gap, it must be committed to seeing *all* of its teachers and students as ***able, valuable,* and *responsible***; to valuing *cooperation* and *collaboration*; and to developing *untapped possibilities.* The key then becomes that of raising the achievement of all students and thereby closing the special education achievement gap.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To close the achievement gap between the performance of students with disabilities and their peers, Kentucky must implement the following *essential* components. These components are foundational in closing the gap. There should be a process and plan in place to effectively review, revise, implement, and monitor all processes, policies, procedures, professional development, and resources (human and fiscal) to ensure effective implementation and sustainability of each component. The components that must be in place are:

1. **Rigorous Curriculum/Effective Instruction/Ongoing Assessment**
   Students with disabilities must be included in the same rigorous curriculum, as defined in the Kentucky Program of Studies and Kentucky Core Content, as students without disabilities. This inclusion can be met in a variety of service delivery options. Literacy and numeracy instruction and mastery for students with disabilities should be at high levels. To achieve this goal, specific programming at all age and grade levels may be necessary for students with disabilities. Effective instructional practices must be employed and evaluated to ensure that students learn at high levels. Instructional strategies should be individualized to meet the unique learning needs of all students. Routine ongoing assessment of student performance and CATS data should be an integral part of effective programming and school improvement. Service delivery options available to Admissions and Release Committees (ARC) should consistently adhere to the standards cited above during the development of each child's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

2. **Teacher Quality and Certification**
   Students with disabilities must be instructed by quality teachers. They must be instructed by teachers who are certified to teach in their assigned areas, exemplify professionalism, are committed to the progress of all students, display mastery in their areas of expertise, have a thorough understanding of effective instructional strategies, routinely collaborate across content areas and pursue ongoing, job-embedded professional development specific to the needs of their students. Intentional focus must be placed on ensuring teachers with special education certification remain equal and active members in instruction content planning, and the decision making process of a school.

3. **Identification and Placement**
   A process and criteria must be in place to assure that students are appropriately identified as needing special education services. To do this, a proactive, diagnostic pre-referral approach must be designed to determine the underlying causes of a student's poor performance. A student should not be considered as needing special education services based solely on a lack of effective instruction, limited English proficiency, or cultural assumptions. Prior to a referral based on a suspected disability, there should be a process in place that affords students a variety of interventions developed by a team. The interventions should be student specific, modified as needed, and implemented over a reasonable period of time. Once a referral has been made, the use of appropriate, research-based evaluation tools that address all areas of suspected disability must be used. The assessment results and recommendations must be thoroughly explained to all persons that provide instruction to that student as well as to parents.

4. **Accountability**

   Additionally, the programs, services and progress of students with disabilities must be constantly monitored and evaluated at every level. School, district, and state level accountability must be defined, communicated, and monitored with appropriate follow-through for leadership, staff, and students. Local and state policies and procedures that are specifically designed to help in eliminating and closing the special education achievement gap must be carefully developed and internalized at all levels.

5. **Leadership/Culture**

   School, district and state leadership must examine issues related to organizational structures and culture of schools to ensure they meet the needs of students, do not impede the provision of services they need and/or contribute to their failure to achieve. Schools must have manageable organizational and fiscal structures that support and connect with each and every student. All students must have a positive school culture that includes high expectations for students and staff; data-driven decision making; a strong learning community that promotes creativity and experimentation; effective communication with all students, family, staff, and community; high levels of professionalism; nurturing positive relationships; shared leadership; and rituals, traditions, and celebrations focused on student success and achievement. Effective leadership will also appropriately allocate human and fiscal resources, show responsiveness to staff and student needs, and implement a creative problem-solving process.

The recommended actions that follow are organized around these five components. They are further grouped under each of these areas by considerations for the Kentucky Board of Education, actions the Kentucky Department of Education *will* take in each area, and what local school districts and schools need to do in each of the areas. All of these entities have responsibilities in closing the special education achievement gap.

> 1. **Rigorous Curriculum/Effective Instruction/Ongoing Assessment**
> Students with disabilities must be included in the same rigorous curriculum, as defined in the Kentucky Program of Studies and Kentucky Core Content, as students without disabilities. This inclusion can be met in a variety of service delivery options. Literacy and numeracy instruction and mastery for students with disabilities should be at high levels. To achieve this goal, specific programming at all age and grade levels may be necessary for students with disabilities. Effective instructional practices must be employed and evaluated to ensure that students learn at high levels. Instructional strategies should be individualized to meet the unique learning needs of all students. Routine, ongoing assessment of student performance and CATS data should be an integral part of effective programming and school improvement. Service delivery options available to Admissions and Release Committees (ARC) should consistently adhere to the standards cited above during the development of each child's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

**The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) should:**

- Consider amendments to 704 KAR 3:510 to require schools to report their process for identification and student enrollment in advanced placement classes by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic level and identification as a student with a disability.

- Consider amendments to 707 KAR Chapter 1 to strengthen the language to ensure students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum.

**The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) will:**

- Provide eight regional three-day workshops for staff in schools that have significant special education gaps focusing on differentiating instruction, continuous improvement, diagnostic assessment of student performance, and using assessment and evaluation results to improve teaching. To assist in negating beliefs about the ability of students with disabilities, staff from schools that are closing the gaps will make presentations around their achievement data.

- Increase the development of interdisciplinary courses that have the same academic rigor as traditional courses, but with content delivered through a more contextual hands-on approach.

- Develop professional development for its staff and local district staffs that address the issues of cultural competency and responsiveness to ensure students have equitable access to all classes and equitable opportunities to increase student achievement regardless of cultural background, physical abilities, socio-economic status and intellectual abilities, and include components of this professional development in the training that is provided to scholastic review teams.

- Provide professional development to assist schools in addressing instructional discipline and positive social and emotional behavior supports.

- Work with the Kentucky Association of School Councils and other partners to develop training for councils in fulfilling their legal requirements to adopt policies on instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of all learners.

- Provide a statewide support system for collaborative teaching models consisting of a collaboration toolkit, web support, the identification of model schools and a train-the-trainer professional development network within each of the 11 special education cooperatives.

- Develop and disseminate a "how to" guide for schools with a step-by-step process in vertical and horizontal alignment including effective transition planning for all students grade to grade, school to school, and secondary to postsecondary.

- Continue to fund 11 literacy consultants, one at each of the special education cooperatives.

- Provide reading institutes (like Reading First) for all 4th –8th grade special education teachers and all 9th- 12th grade special education teachers next year. The institutes include a Master Trainer program that teaches special education teachers to teach reading that is high quality instruction focused on the five components of effective reading instruction, findings of the National Reading Panel, and proven strategies that are age appropriate.

- Continue to expand the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) initiative that focuses on statewide use of digital technologies to provide students with disabilities access to the general curriculum and assessment. Strategies will include providing more support to local schools, providing financial incentives to schools to secure site licenses for software literacy supports, continuing the number of textbooks that are in digital format, and expanding the Kentucky Accessible Materials Database.

- Increase the technological capacity so that more special education students can participate in CATS online.

**Local Boards of Education and Districts should:**

- Review their policies to ensure all students have access to a rigorous curriculum and ensure promotion of a positive school culture and climate.

- Provide training to Admissions and Release Committee (ARC) members on the federal requirement of provision of instruction in the regular education setting for special education students, unless not feasible. A part of this training should be a discussion of how to ensure access to a rigorous curriculum for students placed in a special education setting.

- Provide schools with research-based instructional resources, materials, methods and strategies that address cultural competency and cultural responsiveness, which includes meeting the needs of special education students. This increases the capacity of all teachers in the schools to more effectively respond to the diverse needs of all students.

- Review their policies to ensure that assignment of students to schools is done in such a way that allows students equitable access to curriculum and resources.

- Assist school councils with development of policies regarding the school schedule that maximizes instructional time. For example, assistance should be provided to schools to ensure the scheduling of special education students into regular education classes to provide the students with instruction in content areas.

- Devise innovative ways to expand instructional time and opportunities for students to learn beyond what currently exists, i.e., extended day, extended year, alternate school calendar and additional years since students have varying learning styles and rates.

- Use the transition planning guides provided by KDE to coordinate transition planning for students throughout the district.

- Provide human and financial resources to support schools in analyzing student achievement data and developing effective responses for closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities. The result of this analysis should be used in planning professional development activities.

**Schools should:**

- Review their school council policies to ensure they address issues of cultural competency and responsiveness to ensure all students have equitable access to classes and equitable opportunities to increase student achievement. For example, councils should review their policies on assignment of students to classes and programs to evaluate equitable access for all students. Councils should also adopt policies on instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of all learners.

- Review their procedures to ensure all students are considered for advanced placement and college preparatory classes regardless of race, gender, socio-economic level or identification as a student with a disability. They should also increase awareness of all parents of the availability of these classes.

- Begin the individual graduation planning process in early middle school and give more serious attention to the varying learning styles and interests of students. Time should be set aside for frequent review by staff and students of the plan. Learning style inventories should also be given to primary students and the results applied to their instructional needs.

- Devise innovative ways to expand instructional time and opportunities for students to learn beyond what currently exists, i.e., extended day, extended year, alternate school calendar and additional years since students have varying learning styles and rates.

- Provide professional development as needed to assist teachers in maximizing instructional time in the classroom.
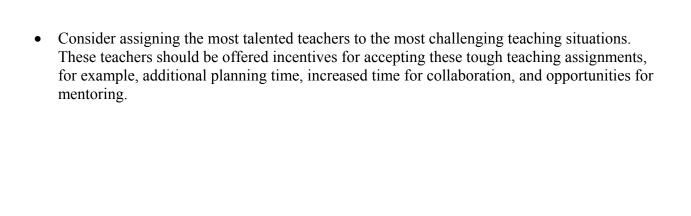
2. **Teacher Quality and Certification**
   Students with disabilities must be instructed by quality teachers. They must be instructed by teachers who are certified to teach in their assigned areas, exemplify professionalism, are committed to the progress of all students, display mastery in their areas of expertise, have a thorough understanding of effective instructional strategies, routinely collaborate across content areas and pursue ongoing, job-embedded professional development specific to the needs of their students. Intentional focus must be placed on ensuring teachers with special education certification remain equal and active members in instruction content planning, and the decision making process of a school.

**The Kentucky Department of Education  (KDE) will:**

- Increase the funds to special education cooperatives to continue providing scholarships and traineeships to emergency and probationary special education teachers. This will increase the number of qualified (certified) special education teachers.

- Identify schools that are closing the special education gap and have these model schools to present at statewide conferences that focus on quality teaching and content areas. Schools will discuss what they are doing to close the special education achievement gap.

- Continue to work with college and university education programs to emphasize and promote the requirement for regular education content majors to receive coursework in special education.  KDE will continue its commitment to encourage them to offer dual certification in special education and content areas.

- Use some discretionary special education federal funds to provide grants to Kentucky institutions of higher education willing to begin special education programs and to those that foster skills in collaborative teaching.

- Initiate discussions with personnel from the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB) and school districts to arrive at a common understanding and definition for collaborative teaching models that is in alignment with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements.

- Continue dialogue with staff from the KDE and EPSB that will ensure the New Teacher Standards include standards related to collaborative teacher during the KTIP year for all regular and special education teachers.

- Work with institutions of higher education programs that grant special education administrative certification to ensure that they emphasize integration of regular and special education programming.

**Schools should:**

- Encourage staff to participate in the professional development toolkit and web support provided in the collaborative teaching support system.

- Consider assigning the most talented teachers to the most challenging teaching situations. These teachers should be offered incentives for accepting these tough teaching assignments, for example, additional planning time, increased time for collaboration, and opportunities for mentoring.

> **3. Identification and Placement**
> A process and criteria must be in place to assure that students are appropriately identified as needing special education services. To do this, a proactive, diagnostic, pre-referral approach must be designed to determine the underlying causes of a student's poor performance. A student should not be considered as needing special education services based solely on a lack of effective instruction, limited English proficiency, or cultural assumptions. Prior to a referral based on a suspected disability, a process should be in place that affords students a variety of interventions developed by a team. The interventions should be student specific, modified as needed, and implemented over a reasonable period of time. Once a referral has been made, the use of appropriate, research-based evaluation tools that address all areas of suspected disability must be used. The assessment results and recommendations must be thoroughly explained to all persons that provide instruction to that student as well as to parents.

**The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) should:**

- Consider amendments to the state special education regulations (707 KAR Chapter 1) to require school districts to: 1) use a proactive, diagnostic, intervention approach designed to determine the underlying causes of poor student performance prior to referral for special education services; 2) add specific language to ensure that there is not an over-identification of students receiving special education services, specifically the over-identification of African American males; and 3) revise language to ensure appropriate research-based evaluations are performed and the recommendations are used to plan a student's program. The concepts of the pre-referral system would be developed by the state and expected to be followed statewide to ensure uniformity and equity. Parameters and the specific language on over-identification and access to the general curriculum would be developed by KDE and presented to the KBE for approval.

**The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) will:**

- Create and disseminate professional development around the process that effectively identifies and intervenes on behalf of students with a suspected disability.

- Facilitate a discussion with institutions of higher education representatives and professional organizations to develop a recommended list of evaluation tools that are research-based and designed to assess specific areas of disabilities.

**Schools should:**

- Create a team of educators within the school that serve as a Teacher Assistant Team (TAT) for students with suspected disabilities prior to a referral.

- Develop procedures to ensure evaluation results are thoroughly understood and used by the ARC members in order to plan an appropriate IEP.

> **4. Accountability**
>
> Additionally, the programs, services and progress of students with disabilities must be constantly monitored and evaluated at every level. School, district, and state level accountability must be defined, communicated, and monitored with appropriate follow-through for leadership, staff, and students. Local and state policies and procedures that are specifically designed to help in eliminating and closing the special education achievement gap must be carefully developed and internalized at all levels.

**The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) should:**

- Consider proposing legislation that would require training for school councils on how to screen principal candidates and interview them to: (1) ensure they demonstrate an understanding of the issues surrounding achievement gaps and (2) they have ideas for solving them.

- Consider establishing a committee within the Board dedicated to closing the special education achievement gap. Among other activities, this committee would regularly review data on the performance of special education students, their participation in general education settings and activities, graduation rates, suspension and expulsion rates, etc.

**The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) will:**

- Embed its current Equity Analysis Instrument into the Standards and Indicators for School Improvement (SI/SI). The revised SI/SI document and review process will then be used with schools KDE has identified as not closing the special education gap (and other gaps). Schools will not have to wait until they are in assistance to benefit from this document and process.

- Review its internal practices to ensure equitable investment of resources and support is provided to schools and districts that are addressing this achievement gap and ensure closing achievement gap issues are cross agency priorities. The Associates Clearinghouse will be a filter for all KDE activities in addressing "how does this relate to closing the achievement gap."

- Review the school improvement plans of those schools that are not meeting their goals to close the special education achievement gap and provide targeted assistance. This assistance will include assignment of staff(s) skilled in the process of change that will lead them through a guided process (including the revised SI/SI with the embedded assessment of equity and school culture). The process will engage the schools and districts, in collaboration with their community partners, in developing a comprehensive and intentional system of supports for the teachers, students and classroom instruction. The change agent will assist the schools to differentiate instruction, develop diagnostic assessments and use assessment and evaluation results to improve teaching.

- Have a plan for continuous professional development for KDE staff in the issues of closing the achievement gap.

- Utilize various data and tools to continuously identify a list of schools that are closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities and make the list available to districts. The list will include narrative data and information about the schools.

- Continue to work with the Exceptional Children Forms Committee and the Special Education Monitoring Committee to ensure paperwork and documentation required by KDE do not exceed federal requirements and do not present undue burdens on districts. These committees are composed of local directors of special education who advise KDE on the forms and monitoring that are necessary for special education compliance with IDEA.

**Local Boards of Education and Districts should:**

- Ensure accountability by requiring schools not making progress on closing the special education achievement gap to report quarterly in an open board meeting on steps being taken to close the gap.

- Have a continuous plan for educating professional staff, school boards, school council members, parents, the community and businesses about achievement gap issues in their schools and the plans for solving them.

- Develop an intensive plan for central office staff to assist schools in evaluating how the professional development they offer supports and promotes high academic achievement for all students.

**Schools should:**

- Review their Kentucky Performance Reports, diagnostic data and other data to make decisions in appropriately serving students.

> **5. Leadership/Culture**
> School, district and state leadership must examine issues related to organizational structures and culture of schools to ensure they meet the needs of students, do not impede the provision of services they need and/or contribute to their failure to achieve. Schools must have manageable organizational and fiscal structures that support and connect with each and every student. All students must have a positive school culture that includes high expectations for students and staff; data-driven decision making; a strong learning community that promotes creativity and experimentation; effective communication with all students, family, staff, and community; high levels of professionalism; nurturing positive relationships; shared leadership; and rituals, traditions, and celebrations focused on student success and achievement. Effective leadership will also appropriately allocate human and fiscal resources, show responsiveness to staff and student needs, and implement a creative problem-solving process.

**The Kentucky Board of Education should:**

- Consider asking the legislature to amend KRS 160.180(5) and KRS 160.345 (6) to require superintendents and SBDM councils to receive six (6) hours of training in the areas of reviewing data on student performance, policy review, setting targets for academic performance and achievement gap reduction and review and revision of improvement plans to enable them to fulfill their obligations under S.B.168, as well as address the need to close the achievement gaps in their schools and districts.

- Consider amending KRS 160.180 (5) to require local school boards to receive three (3) hours of training in the areas of developing and modifying policies, adopting biennial targets and reviews, reviewing improvement plans, setting gap reduction targets, and determining use of professional development funds to enable them to fulfill their obligations under S.B.168.

- Consider reviewing its Strategic Plan to clarify the objectives in Goal I to ensure an intentional focus on closing achievement gaps.

**The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) will:**

- Assist local districts in the blending of resources so they can best meet the service needs of students and on how to accurately report expenditures when blending resources. A guidance manual will be provided that will help districts and schools make optimal use of their resources, deploy resources more effectively, reframe the roles of personnel and integrate instruction, management and learning supports as necessary to meet the diverse needs of students.

- Feature schools closing achievement gaps on Inside Kentucky Schools on KET, in Kentucky Teacher and on the KDE web page. KDE will also develop a recognition program to celebrate, publicize and honor schools that are making continuous progress while significantly closing the special education achievement gap.

- Revise the school improvement planning process to allow schools to focus on specific indicators that would yield the greatest student improvement based on their analysis of specific school data. Currently, schools must address all of the indicators.

- Review policies and practices to ensure that equitable support is provided to schools that are addressing the achievement gap for students with disabilities. The review should include, at a minimum, identification of redundancies and gaps in services and mapping of resources**.**

- Require each office in the KDE to build capacity within to understand and address issues related to closing the special education achievement gap and to participate in inter-departmental discussions and work groups.

**Local Boards of Education and Districts should:**

- Review their allocation of funds and consider targeting of funds to schools to support best practices in the inclusion of students with disabilities (collaboration grants), in order to encourage participation of special education students in the regular curriculum.

- Provide seminars and informational sessions to educate parents and the community on collaborative approaches to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Such sessions should address the mandate for students with disabilities to receive services to meet their individual needs and how these services will be provided. The sessions should also discuss the various service delivery options that are available to students to meet their needs.

- Lead the collaboration with community partners, i.e., local comprehensive care center, mental health center, and social services agencies, to support community programs and provide assistance to schools in addressing the emotional and mental health needs of students.

- Review their policies to ensure the district's organizational structure supports the unique needs of students with disabilities.  For example, is there an emphasis or reliance on self-contained classes for certain categories of disabilities or is an effort made to integrate students into more collaborative settings?

- Support and encourage school personnel to take and/or provide professional development on school culture and to allocate time for school staff to visit model schools with demonstrated positive cultures for meeting the needs of all students.

**Schools should:**

- Assure every student in school has an adult who cares about his/her learning as well as about him/her as an individual. They should assign an adult to advise, support, advocate, and mentor each student in the school. Connectedness to school is a significant contributor to student achievement. Student attendance is better when they perceive adults as caring about their academic and non-academic needs and intentionally and frequently celebrating their successes. This is particularly significant for students with disabilities, who often lack connectedness.

- Consider using their financial resources to extend learning opportunities for students with disabilities (extending the day, etc.).

- Establish an achievement gap committee within the school council as a standing committee responsible for building awareness and forwarding issues around achievement gaps for discussion and problem-solving.

- Regularly review how funding is allotted if the school has a special education achievement gap to ensure equitable spending.

- Review policies and practices to ensure that equitable support is provided to schools that are addressing the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

- Work with parents, the community and businesses to educate and solicit support for programs and services they have designed to meet their goal of closing the special education achievement gap.

- Review the use of space to ensure no space is specifically relegated to specific student groups. For example, there should be no "special education wing" of the building. Students with disabilities should not be placed in substandard conditions such as former locker rooms or stages. If portable structures are absolutely needed, then a rotation system of classes in the school should be established.